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What Else Is Civilization For? Narration Overcoming Fear and Trauma in Graham Swift

Graham Swift's fairly slim body of work (eight novels and a collection of short stories) displays striking thematic consistence. Motifs of loss and crisis appear in each of his oeuvres, and most of them are narratives of people attempting to come to terms with traumatising experience. Fragmented and repetitive, the structure of Swift's texts represents the characters' sense of alienation from the world and entrapment in traumatic temporality which refuses linear development. At the same time, for many of Swift's scarred protagonists, great and personal narratives are a method of dealing with the trauma of experience and the overwhelming meaninglessness of unmediated reality. Faced with its ever elusive nature, most of Swiftian narrators learn that their efforts at overcoming fear can only be temporary and tentative. While mourning the impossibility of regaining original wholeness, Swift's novels celebrate the contingency of the human condition and question the value of absolutist narratives aiming at eradicating the uncertainty of their subjects.

The inaccessibility of the factor motivating obsessive repetition in individuals affected by trauma as well as their sense of separation from their own experience or presence in the world implies an analogy with the traumatic experience of entry into the symbolic realm, also organised by a gap between the individual and the object of his or her desire. Stephen Ross notes that trauma provokes repetition which "effectively symbolises the traumatic kernel that organises his or her symptoms without ever approaching the truth of the motivating traumatic episode" and notes the analogy of this symbolisation with the way in which the symbolic order employs "alternative signifiers as provisional substitutive compensations for the irremediable lack created in

its radical reorganisation of the world.”¹ For most of Swift’s narrators, the order imposed on reality by the use of the symbolic structures of language is indeed provisional. The aim of this article is to compare the way in which Swift approaches the contingency of the consolation offered by storytelling in his two early novels, *Shuttlecock* (1982) and *Waterland* (1983). The choice is motivated by the uniqueness of the position of Prentis, the narrator of the former novel, who, unlike other tormented voices of Swift’s fiction, is apparently quite successful in overcoming his sense of frustration and detachment from his idealised image of the natural world and who furthermore claims to have abandoned without regret his initial desire for complete knowledge. Several critics convincingly question the credibility of the narrator and his achievement, contrasting him with the more mature figure of Tom Crick in the latter work. While Prentis assumes absolute control of the final section of his account, suggesting the reader should take its reliability for granted, Crick remains persistently hesitant, reluctantly but inevitably abandoning the comforting illusions of all-encompassing narratives.

Tamas Benyei in his article “The Novels of Graham Swift: Family Photos,” specifies as one of the central themes in Swift’s prose “the essential rupture between ordinary individual experience and what is referred to as history [which] is a privileged example of [...] the more general rupture between the individual psyche and experience in general.”² The wounding character of this rupture invites a link with the notion of trauma as elaborated by Cathy Carruth on the basis of Freud’s “The Pleasure Principle,” which she describes as follows: “the wound of the mind [...] is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.”³

In discussing the traumatic temporality experienced by the characters of Swift’s first novel, *The Sweet-Shop Owner* (1980), Benyei notes how the “essentially wounded, dislocated nature of the time of the family” is represented in the narrative structure by interruptions of the protagonist’s internal mono-

¹ Stephen Ross, “A Very Brief Introduction to Lacan,” last modified February 6, 2002, <http://web.uvic.ca/~saross/lacan.html>.

² Tamas Benyei, “The Novels of Graham Swift. Family Photos,” in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Oxford: Polity, 2003), p. 42.

³ Cathy Carruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996). Quoted in Richard Russell, “Embodiments of History and Delayed Confessions: Graham Swift’s *Waterland* as Trauma Fiction,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 45 (2009), accessed August 28, 2010, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&c&d=5031566878>.

logue.⁴ Similar stylistic devices, including disturbances of chronology, reappear throughout most other novels of the author. Richard Russell offers the example of the digressive narrative style of *Waterland* as illustrating the difficulty of coming to terms with trauma through its interweaving of personal experience with historical events both local and global, shifting between times and perspectives, or employing a variety of genres to indicate the difficulty of the task of imposing order on its material. Indeed, Russell classifies *Waterland* as “a trauma fiction” and quotes the dilemma posed by the author of the term, Anne Whitehead: “if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?” The suggested solution is “that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection.”⁵ However, the collapse of the narrative and chronology is perhaps most explicitly represented in “allegorical figure[s] of silence,” which Benyei points out as one extreme of linguistic responses to trauma in Swift, whose “every novel contains [...] a catatonic character [...] living in a home and embodying some mystifying secret that another character is obsessively trying to excavate [...] also embodying the element beyond language that all the novels contain within themselves like a secret centre.”⁶ Among examples are characters of Prentis Senior in *Shuttlecock*, who is literally in a state of a “language coma,” refusing any form of explanation that his son fervently desires or the wife of *Waterland*’s narrator, Mary Crick, whose madness is displayed precisely in her inability to tell the trauma of her life. An experience of a crude abortion in her adolescence, repressed for a long time, finally disturbs the normal mental process of memory in a manner symptomatic for other trauma victims in Swift’s prose: “First there is nothing; then there is happening; a state of emergency. And after the happening, only the telling of it. But sometimes the happening won’t stop and let itself be turned into memory. So she’s still in the midst of events... which have not ceased. Which is why it’s impossible to get through. Which is why she cannot cross into the safe, sane realm of hindsight and answer the questions of the white-coated doctors: ‘Now tell us, Mrs Crick, you can tell us everything, you can tell...’”⁷

One character who is liberated from traumatic memory is Mary’s father in law, Henry Crick, a shell-shocked soldier who comes back from WWI as “a hospital case [who] limps and blinks and falls flat on his face at sudden

⁴ Benyei, “Family Photos,” pp. 45–46.

⁵ Quoted in Russell, “Embodiments of History,” <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a-o&d=5031566878>.

⁶ Benyei, “Family Photos,” pp. 52–53.

⁷ Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, 1984), p. 284.

noises.” He also finds himself helpless in the face of the atrocities he witnessed and unable to process them, turn them into a narrative: “For a long time he finds it hard to separate in his mind the familiar-but-foreign fields of the Fens and the foreign-but-familiar mudscapes he has come from ... He thinks: there is only reality, there are no stories left. About his war experience he says: ‘I remember nothing.’”⁸ However, thanks to a “story-book romance”⁹ with his nurse, he “learns, also, to tell those stories of old Flanders... which will lead on to other stories, till the pain, save for sporadic twinges in the knee, is almost gone.”¹⁰ It is Helen’s story-telling which is used to reintroduce Henry into language and work through the traumatic event enabling him to overcome “the paradoxical temporality of the trauma,”¹¹ in which the momentous past event continues to be repeated endlessly in the victim’s mind. An absence of meaning is at the centre of the repetition, since Henry is not actually haunted by the horrifying details of his experience; instead “it’s oblivion he’d like to forget, it’s that sense of the dizzy void he can’t get away from.”¹² In this, his trauma is reminiscent of Bruce Fink’s presentation of “[t]he unframed real – the reality [...] devoid of categories, not located in any symbolic context [which] resists ... location or contextualization.” Treating trauma therefore means, in Fink’s terms, that language “has to be brought in ex post facto” in order to “speak those events, weave them into a fabric of meaning, and thus diffuse their impact.” In *Waterland*, this is the task of Helen, who recognises the need to provide her patients precisely with “the symbolic or linguistic parameters in which the experience fits.”¹³ Her strategy is arguably opposite to that of Prentis, when she tells the traumatised soldiers: “No, don’t forget. Don’t erase it. You can’t erase it. But make it into a story.”¹⁴ The therapeutic value of narrativisation allows a domestication of the inexpressible experience without denying its irreducibly traumatic character.

The other kind of response to trauma is represented by the narrators obsessing over the extralinguistic mystery, whose “loquacious, meandering, self-conscious, highly rhetorical and profoundly symptomatic filibustering”¹⁵ constitutes an attempt to restore order in reality through language. Tom Crick, arguably the most representative of these figures, “knows about the efficacy of storytelling from his parents – his father, Henry, who descends from

⁸ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 17.

⁹ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 130.

¹⁰ Swift, *Waterland*, pp. 194–195.

¹¹ Benyei, “Family Photos,” p. 48.

¹² Swift, *Waterland*, p. 193.

¹³ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter. Reading Ecrits Closely* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 171–172.

¹⁴ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 194.

¹⁵ Benyei, “Family Photos,” p. 53.

a long line of storytellers, and his mother, Helen, whose work with veterans of the Great War teaches her that stories are ‘a way of bearing what won’t go away, a way of making sense of madness.’”¹⁶ Tellingly, the narrator of *Shuttlecock* does not fit into either of these modes, since he “sings the virtues of suppressing traumatic knowledge, to dissolve – rather than to solve – the problems diagnosed by the earlier novel. The validity of this distinction is borne out by Swift’s later work, starting with *Waterland*, which reveals all attempts to exorcize the problem of trauma to be doomed to backfire and takes up the search for alternative, more fruitful ways of dealing with the issue.”¹⁷ Since Prentis ends his narrative more or less at the point when the suppression takes place, he is able to insist on its completeness. However, as some critics have pointed out, the ethics as well as the effectiveness of the move are questionable.

Prentis’s initial situation is that of frustration and alienation. Overwhelmed by two paternal figures – his own, idealised father, a WWII hero and a domineering, manipulative boss, a supervisor of the dead crimes division of the London police – Prentis admits being a weak man who vents his frustration by terrorizing his wife and two young sons and who is not really able to communicate with them. The narrator’s sense that he lacks influence over his circumstances is evident in his relations with Prentis senior and Quinn, both of whom frustrate his desire for knowledge of his father’s past. The father himself has fallen into a quasi-catatonic state, denying all possibility of communication, while Quinn deliberately hides information from Prentis and hinders his attempts at discovering the truth of cases he is working on. Prentis’s increasing suspicion about his father’s heroic past is fuelled by Quinn’s implying the existence of evidence for Prentis senior’s treason. In absence of a direct source of information, Prentis is forced to resort to rereading obsessively his father’s autobiography and struggling to draw conclusions from incomplete materials submitted to him by Quinn.

The father’s autobiography, whose title, identical with that of Swift’s novel, invites comparisons with the son’s narrative, also sets a model for the protagonist’s desire to be reunited with nature. Stef Craps notes that Prentis senior, in the crucial moments of his narrative, “assumes positively ‘Wordsworthian’ overtones in [his] invocation of nature as a benign force responsive to man’s needs and desires” and claims that in his description the “escape from the Château becomes an attempt to re-establish the harmonious relationship with nature which the war is seen to have disrupted.”¹⁸ Significantly, the narrator

¹⁶ Irene Kacandes, *Talk Fiction* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. 110.

¹⁷ Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton, Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), p. 61.

¹⁸ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, p. 62.

explicitly admits the conventionality of his observations: "Since then I have come to believe – a blatant case of the pathetic fallacy, no doubt – that woods and the trees are always on the side of the fugitive and the victim, never on the side of the oppressor."¹⁹ His son, however, appears to decide finally to take them at face value. In the shortest chapter of the novel,²⁰ he asks his wife: "'Marian', I say (she is still talking to her plants), 'do you believe in the pathetic fallacy? That it's really a fallacy, I mean?'"²¹ The subsequent account of an idyllic trip with his family to a beach and anthropomorphic descriptions of the landscape imply his own answer to the question. Stef Craps points out that Prentis "uses the Camber Sands episode to impose closure on his story," and that his narrative apparently overlooks the vague status of the unstable area between land and sea, constantly threatened by the incoming tide as well as "relics of the war that still littered the region."²² The pathetic fallacy is employed as a valid method of conclusively overcoming the uncomfortable contingency of human existence, even while the narrator himself hints at the limitations of the strategy.

As a result of a showdown with Quinn, Prentis arrives at a similar decision concerning his approach to traumatic past. Even before he receives suggestions of any incriminating evidence, he begins to doubt his father's self-portrayal: while the descriptions of his work as a spy are detailed and factual, it is not so with "the goings on in that interrogation room, and other, sinister rooms [about which] Dad is silent, or circumspect."²³ Considering possible explanations of this vagueness, Prentis decides that it is not the result of amnesia but rather a traumatic memory, "not in the least impaired, still vivid-sharp, but the memory of something so terrible that it cannot be repeated, cannot be spoken or written of." While attempting "to discover [...] some inkling of this experience beyond words,"²⁴ Prentis further becomes increasingly suspicious of his impression that "[t]hese pages are more vivid, more real, more believable than any other part of the book."²⁵ In her discussion of conventions of realism as "talking over" and at the same time disclosing the trauma of the real, Lena Magnone observes that "[r]ealism can not really be said to mirror reality but rather the drama of our separation from it,"²⁶ arguing that the exaggerated representation of the world in realist

¹⁹ Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock* (London: Picador, 1997), p. 164.

²⁰ Quoted here in its entirety.

²¹ Swift, *Shuttlecock*, p. 215.

²² Swift, *Shuttlecock*, p. 216.

²³ Swift, *Shuttlecock*, p. 105.

²⁴ Swift, *Shuttlecock*, p. 106.

²⁵ Swift, *Shuttlecock*, pp. 106–107.

²⁶ Lena Magnone, "Traumatyczny realizm," in *Rewolucja pod spodem*, ed. Przemysław Czapliński (Poznań: Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne, 2008), p. 25. My translation.

literature proves “more real than reality” and is suspicious precisely because of its excessive fidelity to detail.²⁷ Prentis’s doubts about his father’s text are supported by a suggestion of Quinn, who speculates that the book may quite literally serve as a cover for an absence of heroic past: “He starts to see the publication of his memoirs [...] as a means rebutting once and for all the possibility of exposure, of presenting the hero-image in such a complete and thorough way that no one will dare challenge it.” In an argument not dissimilar from Magnone’s, Quinn implies that this is why the final chapters have to be more convincing than any other part of the book; after all “that’s where all the urgency is. It’s here that he’s trying to save himself. Why does it read like a real escape? Because it is an escape, a quite real escape, of a kind.”²⁸ The ostentatious realism of this section may therefore be seen as grounded in its function, which is to hide from the reader the inexpressible traumatic core motivating the whole narrative. By accepting Quinn’s offer to burn the file possibly containing the details of his father’s betrayal and consequently replacing Quinn in the role of “a disseminator and destroyer of information, a dictator of fact,”²⁹ Prentis performs his own escape, in turn inviting the reader’s distrust of his account. However, he also dismisses it immediately before his final reflection on pathetic fallacy: “Once you have read [this book], it may be better not to peer too hard beneath the surface of what it says – or [...] what it doesn’t say.”³⁰

Craps notes that with its final chapter *Shuttlecock* inscribes itself in the convention of Bildungsroman, which requires the hero to achieve a state of harmony and maturity, “described by [Franco] Moretti in terms which call to mind the device of the pathetic fallacy and the fusion with nature to which it aspires: ‘Ultimate symbolic gratification: the world speaks our language.’”³¹ For Prentis, the invocation of Romantic vocabulary is a means to legitimise his claims of finally fulfilling social expectations and living up to the standards set by the idealised figure of his father. His approach, however, is questionable even in the light of its aforementioned “Wordsworthian overtones.” As Elizabeth Wright argues, following Friedrich Schiller’s distinction between naïve and sentimental poetry, where the former is characterised by “what he saw as unselfconscious, unmediated relation to nature in which the real and the ideal are, at least momentarily at one” while the latter by “a self-conscious distanced one in which the poet is aware of his (symbolic) alienation,” Wordsworth’s tendency for mourning his losses through poetry

²⁷ Magnone, “Traumatyczny realizm,” p. 26.

²⁸ Swift, *Shuttlecock*, p. 187.

²⁹ Patrick O’Donnell, “Masterplots II: *Shuttlecock*,” *The Salem Press* (January 1 1987). Quoted in Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, p. 58.

³⁰ Swift, *Shuttlecock*, p. 214.

³¹ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, p. 55.

makes him a “sentimental” poet, prepared to acknowledge the limits of his power over his linguistic medium as well as those of the medium itself.³² The speaking voice of Wordsworth’s poetry is thus arguably far more willing to embrace the tension between the attempts to symbolise experience and what resists symbolisation than Prentis, whose wish for “erasure or denial of a traumatic reality documented by the records of the dead crimes department”³³ clearly undermines the ethical validity of *Shuttlecock*’s denouement. Donald Kaczvinsky openly challenges the maturation of the protagonist: “He has not ‘progressed’ into a more humane and sympathetic character [...] but ‘created’ or ‘invented’ a self, through a textual strategy that at the same time broadens and secures his power base.”³⁴ In Wright’s psychoanalytical terms, the narrator of *Shuttlecock* encloses himself in a fantasy of imaginary plenitude, which serves “to hide from the subject both the subject’s own inadequacy within the symbolic and the symbolic’s inadequacy in mapping the subject and the world.”³⁵ Much like an infant in Lacan’s mirror stage, experiencing a sense of mastery over its own unified image, Prentis ignores the precariousness of his self-image and concludes his narrative with an enforced vision of illusory completion.

While *Shuttlecock* only begins to question the validity of its protagonist’s narrative strategy, Swift’s next novel takes a much more definite stand on the limitations of symbolic constructs. In *Waterland*, violent overriding of reality through narration such as Prentis’s would be impossible since here the symbolic order is shown as repeatedly disturbed by what the narrator calls the “attacks of the Here and Now.”³⁶ Tom Crick’s understanding of trauma is exemplified in his justification of his family’s tendency to resort to story-telling as a means of overcoming a sense of fear and powerlessness. He defines the source of the threat as “[receiving] strong doses of reality. The great, flat monotony of reality; the wide, empty space of reality. [...] How do you surmount reality, children? [...] How did the Cricks outwit reality? By telling stories.”³⁷ Indeed, the properties and the effects of the Fenland landscape are markedly similar to those ascribed by Slavoj Žižek to “the Real in its most terrifying imaginary dimension, as the primordial abyss that swallows everything, dissolving all identities.”³⁸ For the Cricks, faced with the

³² Elizabeth Wright, *Speaking Desires Can Be Dangerous* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 74–75.

³³ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, p. 66.

³⁴ Donald Kaczvinsky, “‘For One Thing, There are the Gaps’: History in Graham Swift’s *Shuttlecock*,” *Critique*, 40 (1998), p. 12.

³⁵ Wright, *Speaking Desires*, p. 5.

³⁶ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 52.

³⁷ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 15.

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), p. 64.

meaninglessness of the (heavily) unmediated reality of the Fenlands, covering the traumatising emptiness is part of the effort of sustaining civilisation, “a struggle to preserve an artifice. It’s all a struggle to make things not seem meaningless. It’s all a fight against fear.”³⁹ However, Crick’s attacks of reality may take more active forms, akin to the aspect of “the real [which] actively solicits the attention of the individual, often through an aggressive insistence on its materiality, making itself felt through the very impermeable border which prevents access to it.” Malcolm Bowie uses examples of everyday events that “disrupt the imaginary and symbolic constructs within which we live” to illustrate Lacan’s notion of irruptions of the real as a disturbance of order imposed on constructed reality. In his discussion of Bowie’s text, Stephen Ross points to two functions of this aspect of the real: “first, it demonstrates the persistent element of contingency and outright danger that lurks in the failure of these ordering practices to be exhaustive and comprehensive [...] second, it manifests to the passer-by in a very immediate way the real of his own mortality – it insists on the contingency of human life, however well ordered it may appear.”⁴⁰ For Tom Crick the traumatic experience is a series of tragic events from his youth and their present consequences – his wife’s mental illness with its background of an abortion performed in their adolescence, the murder of Crick’s friend by his jealous half-brother who is made to believe that the friend was the child’s father and finally the brother’s suicide provoked by the realisation that he himself is the result of an incestuous relationship. The real in *Waterland* may take the form of history sending people to wars, the scandal of Mary Crick kidnapping a baby, the dead body of Freddie Parr, the constant instability of the constantly drained Fenlands or the young protagonists’ discovery of sexuality. Moreover, since “the sudden hallucinations of events” constitute only an exception to the predominant emptiness of reality, Tom Crick finds narratives, both personal and public, to be “the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama” in their “longing for presence, for feature, for purpose, for content.”⁴¹ Crick’s need for explaining “the mess [he] was in” lies at the roots of his study of history and leads him to assert that even if no unambiguous explanations are arrived at through narrativising human experience, the consolation of a substitute is a value in itself: “And can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some golden nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself, the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark?”⁴² However, unlike Prentis, Crick is painfully aware of the dangers of believing the illusion of completeness offered by

³⁹ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 208.

⁴⁰ Ross, *Introduction to Lacan*.

⁴¹ Swift, *Waterland*, pp. 34–35.

⁴² Swift, *Waterland*, p. 53.

human endeavours to make the contingency of reality fit the frames of narratives.

The trauma of the events from Crick's youth destroys the idyllic sense of completeness for him and marks the ending of "prehistorical, pubescent times, when we drifted instinctively without the need for prior arrangement, to our meeting place."⁴³ In the context of this transition, George Landow recalls Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and its Romantic convention of the narrator's imaginary return "to the landscape of thoughtless youth, [in which] he concerns himself with the losses of innocence and with the corollary fall into time, self-consciousness, and social existence." Landow stresses a significant alteration in the convention, suitable for a postmodernist text: "unlike 'Tintern Abbey,' *Waterland* bravely refuses to find solace in some Romantic revision of Milton's Fortunate Fall." It might be noted that the distinction also applies to the approach taken by Prentis, who embraces the Romantic position without reservations. The loss of the pre-pubescent sense of wholeness and unity with the world also invites a parallel with the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic order which Prentis's narrative refuses to make. While the former insists on the possibility of recovering a sense of unified, stable selfhood mastering its surroundings through narration, Crick stresses the contingency of human efforts at organising reality, presenting them as "fictional analogues of the land reclamation whose presence dominates the novel. Provisional, essential, limited as they may be, telling stories can never adequately control reality or nature or what's out there or what Tom calls the Here and Now."⁴⁴

Awareness of this condition is precisely what does not allow Crick for a "cop-out from the problem of coming to terms with life in a disenchanted world"⁴⁵ like the one performed by Prentis. The narrator of *Waterland* discovers the limitations of symbolisation early on, when he eagerly accepts the official cause of Freddie Parr's death (accidental drowning) as erasing the trauma of knowledge that it was a murder to which he indirectly pushed his brother. His girlfriend's blatant refusal to pretend ignorance leaves him disappointed, but aware that "he was still in the same mess, after all – just as he was thinking that a neat phrase had hauled him out. Just as he was succumbing to the illusion that everything was all right, like it was before."⁴⁶ Numerous examples which he encounters in his later work as a historian, closely entwined with his interpretations of his own life, consolidate his conviction: "Negating

⁴³ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 44.

⁴⁴ George Landow, "History, His Story, and Stories in Graham Swift's *Waterland*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 23 (1990), pp. 197–211, accessed July 6, 2010, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/uk/gswift/wl/gplstories.html>

⁴⁵ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 115.

the radically disorienting impact of trauma, typically through the pursuit of an illusory ideal of wholeness or completion, is shown to have catastrophic personal and political consequences.”⁴⁷

The final scene of the novel, the suicide of Tom’s mentally handicapped half-brother Dick, conceived by his grandfather with his own daughter to become the saviour of the world, serves well to illustrate the renunciation of the dangerous belief in completeness of explanations effectively masking the traumatic nature of experience. Tamas Benyei describes the scene as an “eschatological event emptied of its true eschatological content and its power to redeem historical existence. The end provides no vantage point for Crick; rather, it is a moment that makes Crick’s life (and therefore history) futureless, devoid of meaning, and thus causes a compulsion in Crick to repeat and re-tell the story endlessly. Instead of conferring unity and coherence on the story, this end makes it disjunctive.”⁴⁸

Dick himself proves to be the navel of Tom’s dream, unable to process or become part of the events he provokes, remaining outside the narrative he set in motion: “He’s as fixed as that pike on the wall. He’s made things happen. Things have happened because of him. He can’t understand. He’s stuck in the past.”⁴⁹ Instead of becoming a saviour of the world, providing a conclusive explanation of human history, a sign of complete knowledge and redemption from fear, Dick refuses signification altogether. He is finally linked with the ineffable forces of nature when he dives into the Ouse “[in] a long, reaching, powerful arc ... sufficiently reaching and powerful for us to observe his body, in its flight through the air, form a single, taut and seemingly limbless continuum, so that an expert on diving might have judged that here indeed was a natural, here indeed was a fish of a man.”⁵⁰ Although the naturalising effect of this description might be seen as an attempt at “covering over” the inexpressible trauma of reality, Crick has to be credited for recognising this in the apology he makes to his brother for the inadequacy of the “succinct fabrication” of his – and indeed any – narrative.⁵¹

Graham Swift’s reworking of the theme of overcoming fear and trauma through narration presents a variety of approaches tending towards a quite consistent emphasis of both the significance and the limitations of the process. Telling stories of their experience allows Swift’s characters to organise the chaos of traumatic events of their lives but never from “some privileged outside

⁴⁷ Craps, *Trauma and Ethics*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Tamas Benyei, “Narrative and Repetition in *Waterland*,” *British and American Studies* 1.1 (1996), p. 115. Quoted in Russell, “Embodiments of History,” <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5031566878>

⁴⁹ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 275.

⁵⁰ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 309.

⁵¹ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 304.

point”⁵² which would enable them to see the world as a whole. Instead of offering the enlightenment that Prentis claims to have achieved, story-telling in most of Swift’s novels performs a function analogous to that assigned by Tom Crick to reclamation of land (in itself an analogy of progress): “Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged and vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business.”⁵³ Much as reclamation of land is not to be mistaken “for the building of empires,”⁵³ the consolation of symbolic constructs, while seen by Swift as the only available defence against fear, by no means allows liberation from the terrifying contingency of the human condition.

⁵² Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, p. 153.

⁵³ Swift, *Waterland*, p. 291.

Sławomir Konkol

**„Od czego w końcu jest cywilizacja?” –
narracja jako metoda przezwycięzania lęku i traumy
w prozie Grahama Swifta**

Streszczenie

Tom Crick, narrator najpopularniejszej powieści Grahama Swifta *Kraina Wód*, uważa opowiadanie historii za metodę łagodzenia dziecięcego lęku przed ciemnością, w potrzebie narracji dostrzegając wyraz typowo ludzkiego dążenia do porządkowania rzeczywistości. Fragmentaryczny i repetytywny styl narracji większości książek Swifta odzwierciedla charakterystyczne dla jego postaci poczucie separacji od świata i uwięzienia w momencie traumy, które uniemożliwia linearne rozwinięcie opowieści. Opłakując niemożliwość odzyskania pierwotnej pełni, powieści Swifta jednocześnie afirmują przypadkowość kondycji ludzkiej, jako że wysiłki protagonistów zmierzające do przezwyciężenia strachu można uznać jedynie za prowizoryczne. Jednocześnie autor kwestionuje status samej narracji jako moralnie niejednoznacznej, potencjalnie nacechowanej przemocą i odpowiedzialnej za nieodwracalne zanurzenie podmiotu w czasie. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi analizę obu podejść do narracji jako metody racjonalnego wyjaśniania rzeczywistości w powieściach *Shuttlecock* (1982) oraz *Kraina wód* (1984) Grahama Swifta.

Sławomir Konkol

**„Wozu denn ist die Zivilisation?“ –
Narration als die in Graham Swifts Prosawerken angewandte Methode,
Angst und Trauma zu überwältigen**

Zusammenfassung

Tom Crick, ein Erzähler in dem populärsten Roman Graham Swifts, *Wasserland* (engl. *Waterland*), hält die Geschichte für eine gute Methode, die kindliche Angst vor Finsternis zu lindern; in dem Bedarf an Erzählen sieht er ein für den Menschen typisches Streben danach, die Wirklichkeit in Ordnung zu bringen. Fragmentarischer und repetitiver Erzählungsstil von den meisten Swifts Büchern spiegelt das für alle seinen Figuren charakteristische traumatische Gefühl der Isolation von der Außenwelt wider, das eine lineare Entwicklung der Erzählung unmöglich macht. Swifts Romane beklagen die Unmöglichkeit, eine primäre Fülle zu erreichen und gleichzeitig heben sie die ganze Zufälligkeit der menschlichen Verfassung hervor; die Bemühungen von Swifts Protagonisten, die Angst zu überwinden, müssen zwar lediglich als provisorisch und vorläufig betrachtet werden.

Gleichmaßen zweifelt der Verfasser an, dass die Narration selbst ethisch mehrdeutig, durch Gewalt gekennzeichnet und für einen irreversiblen Tiefgang des Subjektes in der Welt verantwortlich ist. Der vorliegende Artikel bezweckt, die beiden Betrachtungsweisen von der Narration als einer Methode der rationellen Erklärung der Wirklichkeit in Graham Swifts Romanen *Alias Federball* (engl.: *Shuttlecock*) (1982) und *Wasserland* (engl.: *Waterland*) (1984) zu untersuchen.